

Luke 2.1-20

God's Mysterious ways at Christmas

Christmas Day 2019

Luke 2.1-20

The Birth of Jesus Christ

² In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ³ This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ⁴ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁵ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁶ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁷ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁸ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁹ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ¹⁰ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹¹ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹² For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹³ And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹⁴ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁵ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹⁶ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁷ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁸ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁹ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ²⁰ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²¹ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Intro:

"God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform." Is the opening line of a hymn written in 1773 by one William Cowper.¹ It's a line that you may hear quoted as people sigh when nothing makes sense.

Quote

"God works in mysterious ways
his wonders to perform."

William Cowper
1773

I think it's a good commentary on the Christmas story we are celebrating today. You might think that if you were the creator of the universe and able to arrange whatever you wanted that you would make it easy on yourself and easy on everyone else?

But no, as we read in Isaiah 55.8-9

⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

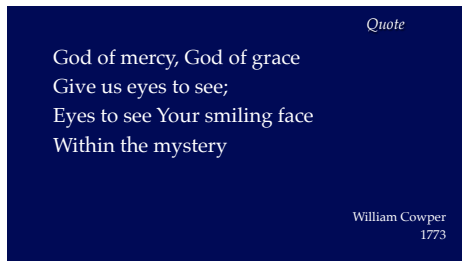
God seems to work in such a way that anyone who really wants to see what God is doing has to make sense of some really random, obscure, baffling and wonderful moments.

That makes it so easy for anyone to say: I don't see anything that could relate to God as believers describe God. There is lots of hiding space afforded if you want it.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znmZswr2J2w> &
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_Moves_in_a_Mysterious_Way

Reality is like that for those who delve into the depths of nature as atom, life as cell or history as it unfolds. We are also like that as mysteries to ourselves.

The Christmas story is like that.



So the hymn that begins saying “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform” has a suitable prayer as its refrain:

God of mercy, God of grace
Give us eyes to see;
Eyes to see Your smiling face
Within the mystery

Text

My two observations about what is strange or random here:

#1.

Apart from the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar and Governor Quirinius mentioned at the start, **all the people named are poor.**

Poor people do not have power to shape the world.

Poor people live around what rich powerful people decide and plan or just what happens.

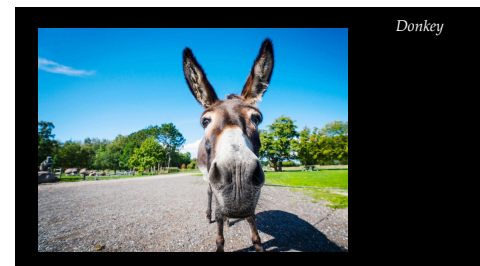
Poor people often live from issue to issue, need to need, circumstance to circumstance.

According to this story God seems to choose to be with the poor. This is so much so that when he comes to be part of humanity, it is to the poor that he comes. This is the neighbourhood he chooses.

So in the story:

Joseph the village ‘Teknon’ or builder / maker (‘Techie’?) takes his wife to get registered because the Government said he had to. It's a bit like the way the Dutch government requires you to register a birth or have identification papers so that they can know who is who.

We always imagine this journey involving a donkey which is not in the story as Luke tells it but still a good guess.



Donkeys were and still are very useful in that part of the world. They are strong little animals.

Some donkeys and a little boy can do a lot hard work

Joseph and Mary are not wealthy but not many people were wealthy.

Then we meet people described as ‘shepherds’. Now we are getting down to earth.

These people are really poor.

In September I saw Bedouin shepherds in Israel moving with their sheep on the barren lands of Jordan and Southern Israel.



Bedouin Camp

This is a typical example of what can be seen from the main road south from Jerusalem. This is a settlement of nomads who camp out outside the towns and then range with their sheep.

This photo shows a common scene of a young boy riding a small donkey out with the sheep. These boys do not go to school and have little contact with the settled world.



Boy on Donkey
with Sheep



So for people who read and write, who live in houses and pay taxes, who gather possessions and plan for a different future for them or their children, these shepherds are not only poor; they are lazy, suspect and best to be avoided. Many people living in Britain think about Gypsies or 'travellers' this way.

But in this story God sends his spiritual messengers known as 'angels' to tell these people first. In the world then and now, if you want to communicate something really, really important to a nation you send a letter or an ambassador with a message to their leadership. But what does God do at Christmas? God sends lots of angels to scruffy unimportant people out of the cities and towns so they are the first to know. This is different!

It is quite possible that these scruffy shepherds were sleeping out in the open in something like a sleeping bag watching the night sky. This is easy when you do not have a building around you – and suddenly they were not alone!



An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased!”

That would be fairly hard to miss and impossible to sleep through so they went looking for the sign of a baby wrapped in strips of material lying in a manger. As shepherds they know about mangers so that was a good clue.

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Give us eyes to see;
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Within the mystery.

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#2.



My second observation is that humanly speaking, nothing was organized and everything – just happened. That may be difficult for us to understand in the Netherlands.

We so like to know what to expect and have a sense that we can shape and determine things. That is the privilege of the rich and powerful, but even then only so far. The poor do not have much control and need to trust and improvise. This is why I think Jesus said later in Luke’s Gospel (6.20)

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Those with no option can but flow with what God is doing and are less likely to mess it up with their own plans and complications.

The First Christmas was prepared in heaven and just happened on earth.

To live in this lack of control and apparent random flow requires the sort of peace Jesus modeled when sleeping in the boat during a storm. The winds blew and the waves rose but confident in God’s heavenly reign, Jesus could sleep. His time was not yet.

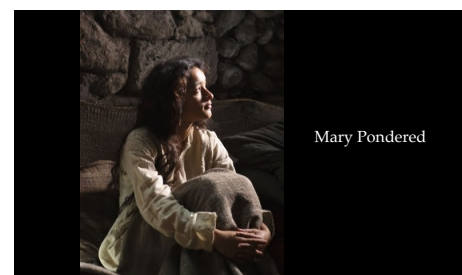
The one most at the centre of the first Christmas storm was Mary. If modern day comparisons still apply; 1 in 10 child-bearing women would die each year. My friends in Niger saw this still happening just a decade ago.

Luke tells us where this all left Mary:

¹⁹ ... Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

This is what the people of Israel had always been so good at: Recognizing that what happened was not just C follows B which follows A but the hand of God can be recognized and faith in him and his Kingdom is the best way.

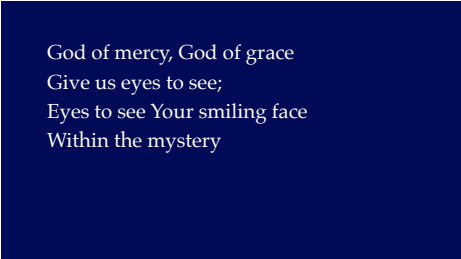
Conclusion



There are more curious things to be noted in the Christmas story. The thing I want to leave you with is that just as at Christmas God is still at work and his MO, or way of working has not changed.

He still seems to value working about those the rich and powerful of the world consider not worth talking to. He still works in ways that ignore and confound our plans and best arrangements.

The best response to the mysteries of God at work is modeled by Mary pondering in her heart and voiced in the prayer:



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